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# Creative Escapism and the Camino de Santiago

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The phenomenon of escapism, extensively analysed in the key mechanism of escape into the world of illusion and imagination in numerous sociological and psychological studies, has not yet been researched from a theological perspective or described in the context of pilgrimage. Nevertheless, the existing studies encourage this type of reflection, indicating that escapism seems to be one of the ways to solve social problems by turning towards religiousness. This is the case for pilgrims on their journey to the tomb of St. James the Apostle in Santiago de Compostela. The studies of pilgrims reveal the escapist motivations behind the decision to go on a journey and the therapeutic effects of the pilgrimage. In this context, the pilgrims' escapism is a creative process of transformation that creates something new.

**Key Words:** Camino de Santiago, escapism, creativity, therapy, transformation

## Introduction

The Way of Saint James (in Spanish: Camino de Santiago, German: Jakobsweg), along with the roads leading to Jerusalem and Rome, is one of the most important pilgrimage routes in Europe. The first pilgrims travelled to the tomb of St. James the Apostle in the first centuries AD, while in the last twenty years the Way of St. James has been experiencing an enormous revival (Mróz *et al.*, 2013:33). In 2018 the Pilgrimage Office in Santiago de Compostela was visited by 327,378 pilgrims, of whom 50.35% were women and 93.49% covered the last 100 kilometers or more on foot, including 4,785 (1.46%) Polish pilgrims (<https://oficinadelperegrino.com>).

The aim of this study is to analyse from a theological perspective the self-transformation process of individual pilgrims influenced by the Camino, understood also as a form of going beyond what is innate and natural, which in the end leads to experiencing God. Is the Camino a kind of escapism of contemporary people seeking to forget or escape everyday problems? Or does the escapism of pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela have a therapeutic potential? For this reason, a theological analysis of studies conducted in Spain by Albert Feliu Soler and Manu Mariño will be undertaken. The psychological studies entitled *Proyecto Ultreya* (<https://www.estudiocamino.org>) aim to assess the impact of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela on the state of mind, life satisfaction, happiness, the ability to be present in the here and now, and make choices in a more conscious way and in accordance with one's own values.

The research conducted by sociologists Paweł Chmielowski and Łukasz Śledziecki in 2015, entitled 'Who Is the Polish Pilgrim of the Way of St. James?' (Drzewiecki *et al.*, 2016:213–214), shows that more than half (54.30%) of Polish pilgrims declared their motivation to undertake the journey along the Way of St James as a desire to break away from everyday life which can be described as escapist motivation. In a study conducted in 2015 by a Portuguese team, escapist motivations defined as an escape from daily routine in search of a change from work or escape from home were listed as the sixth most important motivation type for the 1,140 pilgrims surveyed (31.7% Portuguese, 17.9% Spanish, 12.6% Dutch, 6.1% French, 6.0% Brazilians and 5.6% Americans) (Antunes *et al.*, 2017:5).

*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines escapism as an 'action to avoid reality by imagining exciting but unrealistic actions'. The term escapism is a French-language borrowing – *escapade*, which means escapade or evasion, while *The Oxford English dictionary* describes escapism as 'a tendency to seek or practice in this field or to distract from what usually has to be endured'. Therefore, although stereotypically escapist are depressive people who cannot cope with daily life problems and run away from them, an escapist can also be defined as a person looking for a solution to these problems and a way out of them (Vega, 2014:3).

Escapism can therefore take the form of avoiding confrontation with reality, which is represented by the proverbial behaviour of an ostrich hiding its head in

the sand. This kind of escapism is the opposite of creativity. However, the American psychologist Rollo May, among the main elements of his work, mentions a deep, intense, passionate encounter between humans and the world. According to May, creativity consists of three elements: an intense encounter with the world; the vision that results from this encounter; the action that emerges from the vision (1994: 47). Escapism and creativity essentially distinguish the purpose of action which in the process of creation is to change the world and to introduce something new to it – a piece of work. Therefore, when escapism motivates someone to act in order to relieve or reconcile excess emotions, it has a therapeutic effect and this kind of escapism can be spoken about in the context of the Camino de Santiago. Since creativity is a conscious ordering of reality, the escapism which occurs in the context of the Camino pilgrimage will be described as creative.

### ***Escapism – the State of Research***

Psychological studies most often speak about the negative dimension of escapism and therefore the phenomenon has been fundamentally included as a means of avoiding reality (Teslavskaia *et al.*, 2017:52-64) often veering towards VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality). A Norwegian psychological research coordinated by Frode Stenseng (Stenseng *et al.*, 2012: 19-36) is an interesting study on a two-dimensional model of escapism in relation to recreational sports activities. On a proposed scale of escapism, two types of escape form self were measured: self-expansion and self-suppression. The study of the first was carried out through a questionnaire with the use of questions such as: 'I am constantly trying to learn new things about myself' and 'I am open to experiences that enrich my life'. The negative type of escapism was examined by means of questions such as 'I try to suppress my problems' and 'I try to prevent negative thoughts about myself'. The balance between the two dimensions of escapism was finally examined (Stenseng *et al.*, 2012: 32). The motivation for escapism of the examined people turned out to be crucial: whether it was a harmonious passion or an obsessive passion.

Escapism can also be understood as a kind of retreat from what overwhelms us, from the problems of everyday life, worries, routine or boredom. Thus, escapism understood in this manner helps one to get out of numbness, sadness and stagnation. Some find help in alcohol, drugs or gambling (addictions as examples of obsessive passions), others in going on various kinds of expeditions, engaging with sports or

collecting (positive passions). Mental health experts claim that escaping into the world of fantasy can also be a therapeutic process. For example, a Dutch team in their computer games research determined the therapeutic qualities of escapism based on the statement of one of the respondents:

*If I wasn't able to 'escape' into my computer games, I'd go nuts. I'll not go as far as saying I'm addicted to them, but it really means a lot for me in order to relieve stress and shake off the day.*

The aforementioned discourse states that escapism is needed to relieve stress or channel behaviour. People experience emotions from which they want to find relief. Games are therefore an excellent way of escape, according to this discourse, as they enable players to meet their needs in a safe environment (Warmelink *et al.*, 2009:6). Escapism also offers a way to a more desirable state of existence than the one currently experienced. Yee considers escapism as a way to relax and avoid real life problems (Yee, 2006). Hagström and Kaldo divided escapism into positive and negative (Hagström *et al.*, 2014: 19–25) and Evans (2003), seeing how media are becoming more sophisticated and realistic and people are spending more and more time in front of TV screens, asked where this road leads. Evans explored humor, comedy, science fiction, computer games and all the latest distractions that occupy people's minds and identified four types of escapism:

- avoidance – the main aim of this type of escapism is to escape from reality and real life difficulties,
- passive escapism – this kind of escapism includes actions when the person does not need to undertake any efforts, e.g. listening to music, watching television, films, etc., and when the person does not need to make any effort,
- active escapism – this type of escapism assumes a change of activity from the main activity (e.g. work) to an alternative one (hobby),
- extreme escapism – actions that are actually or potentially dangerous (use of drugs or alcohol, extreme sports, etc.) (Igorevna, 2015:103–104).

We also speak of escapism when a person who feels the need to rest and change is looking for a way to stop thinking about their problems, which allows them to survive and protects them from a nervous breakdown. It is assumed that escapist behaviour should be repetitive, which in some cases could be described as addictive. On the other hand, however, escapism can

also be a behaviour leading to overcome an addiction (Serczyńska, 2017: 275). In both cases, it is a matter of multiple types of behaviour, even if such an escape happens only once a year. In a moderate form, escapism can therefore be described as a positive phenomenon that provides an opportunity to relax, as well as a way to reduce the annoying stress that results from everyday challenges and problems that life brings.

In their research about cause-effect escapism, Hartevald and Mayer have developed the theory of Evans. The first type of escapism appears when a person is bored and wants to escape from everyday life or, on the contrary, when he/she is overly stressed and wants to avoid life's challenges. The second type aims to go beyond the borders of reality through dreaming or engaging in activities to develop some kind of passion. This kind of escapism can be considered productive and contributes to self-fulfillment (Igorovna, 2015: 105).

Most researchers offer and justify an ambivalent model of positive and negative escapism, focusing mainly on the latter. Furthermore, several factors determining escapism (subjective well-being, social support, self-reflection, etc.) are studied rather fragmentarily, without an integrated theoretical system (Igorovna, 2015:105). With reference to the aforementioned distinction, the characteristics of positive escapism will be presented in this study in the context of the Camino de Santiago, which becomes a space for pilgrims to look at themselves from the side, leading to objectification.

Current research projects on escapism are quite specific and do not fully cover the basic theoretical issues of this phenomenon. It is rarely considered that escapism can have a broader meaning and cannot be reduced to a mere immersion in the online world or participation in RPG games. Avoiding reality also refers to immersion in psychotic illusions caused by changing states of consciousness, worlds created in the imagination while reading fantasy books, listening to music, examining works of art, etc. Ultimately, the process of dreaming and fantasising on a daily basis can be considered as an escape from the real world. Therefore the phenomenon of escapism should be studied from a more holistic perspective and theoretical studies aimed at balancing and explaining the two types of escapism and examining them in a broader context as a universal mechanism to allow people to escape from reality in order to adapt to real life seems

to be a comprehensive type of research in the field of psychology of personality today (Igorovna 2015:105).

### *The Camino de Santiago as a Creative Escapism*

In philosophical terms, creativity is referred to as a process that creates something new. Therefore, although generally associated with the field of artistic production, creativity may also refer to other areas of life, such as science or technology. Władysław Stróżewski defines creativity in a general sense and links it with the five categories of issues: novelty, originality, originality and causality, unity and opposites (Stróżewski, 1983). For the purposes of this paper, the issue of novelty, understood as overcoming nothingness and the problem of the beginning, is of paramount importance. In fact, there is a starting point for a creative process and at the same time it is connected with the end of this process: it is already and is not yet what it starts (Stróżewski, 1983: 382).

In the context of the Camino de Santiago we can therefore speak of an active and at the same time creative kind of escapism - according to Evans' theory (Evans, 2003). In her research, Stenseng also focuses on positive escapism and defines it broadly as a form of self-realisation. For her, escapism is a conscious and controlled detachment from reality and an essential condition for creative actions. Her pilot research (n=62) on dancers (aged 18-32) shows that systematic self-reflection based on distance from the situation and the ability to look at oneself objectively, from the side, are key predictors of positive escapism (Teslavskaja *et al.*, 2017: 57).

For the sake of comparison, in psychology, creativity is understood in therapeutic terms, because it is defined as a way of discovering and creating one's own self, which enables the body and soul to be transferred from the existence of an enslaved to the sphere of liberated life, from the cave of the body to its surface. (Kobierzycki, 2010:12).

In reference to the Polish project *Nowa Droga* (New Way), based on the French rehabilitation method of the Threshold (<https://assoseuil.org>), that supports young people leaving penitentiary institutions and detention centres through a hike along the Way of St James, the thesis was put forward that the natural way to treat a person affected by long-term imprisonment is to undertake the physical effort of hiking, which could be called *caminotherapy* – a form of therapy through the Camino. This form of treatment seems to be effective not only for people leaving prisons and detention



centres, but also other types of physical or mental incarceration as a natural desire of an imprisoned person, is to flee and seek to leave all kinds of prisons. The authors of the project decided that after leaving such a place it was a good solution to embark on a journey for rehabilitation and therapeutic purposes (Seryczyńska, 2017:278).

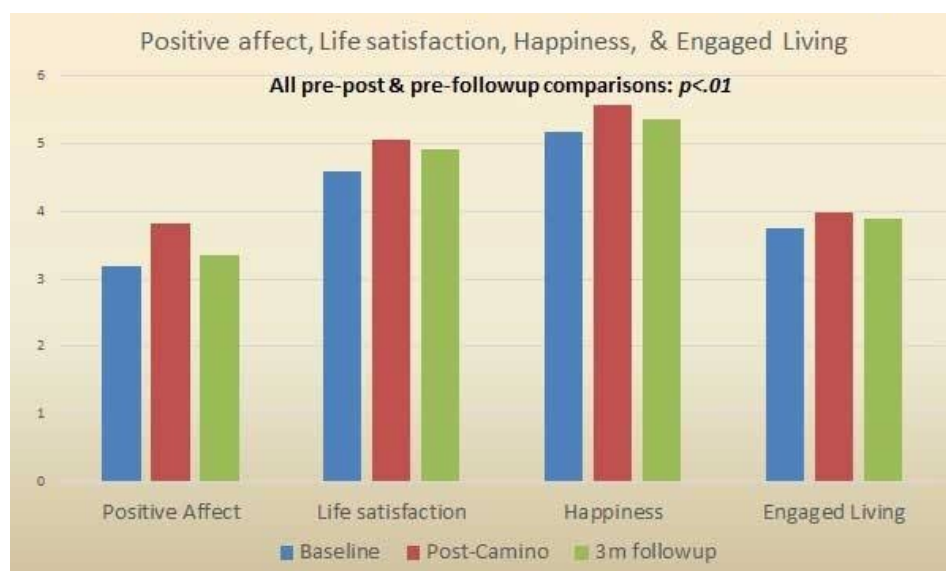
Currently there is a growing interest in various forms of therapy (Józefik, 2011: 737-748). Great importance is attached to health at the existential level, both physical and mental. In crisis situations, people seek help not only from qualified representatives of the health service, but also partake in unconventional medicine from herbalists and various types of therapist. One can even speak about the emergence of a kind of therapeutic culture (Hajduk, 2014:23) and the desire to be healthy seems to dominate over other values – modern people want to be healthy at all costs, even at the expense of other people (Hajduk, 2014:25). However, in the planned research it is assumed that modern people actively seek various therapeutic forms, and as a result, need this therapy. This thesis is also confirmed by Ewa Ficek who discusses *therapeutic discourse* (Ficek, 2012: 250).

The term ‘therapy’ derives from the Greek *therapeuēin*, which denotes ‘looking after’ or ‘worshipping’ and, in a broader sense ‘curing’. Therapy is therefore a non-pharmacological form of influence on a person, which aims at restoring his or

her physical, mental, social and spiritual fitness. However, research by an American team (Warfield *et al.*, 2014:860-875) suggests that pilgrimage has a therapeutic character, in biological, psychological, social and spiritual terms. Due to the fact that the authors of the aforementioned research did not include pilgrims on the Camino routes, Parc Sanitari Sant and Joan de Déu from the University of Zaragoza’s, Quietud Mindfulness Center, the Federal University of Sao Paulo and the Hospital of Santa Creu and Sant Pau ([www.estudiocamino.org](http://www.estudiocamino.org)), with the help of the Camino de Santiago del Norte Association of Friends, have cooperated with the Ultreya Project, which is the first large scale study conducted on the impact which the Camino de Santiago has on mental health and well-being. More than 1,000 pilgrims have participated in the study so far, but the project is ongoing and the participation of many others will make the project more academically sound.

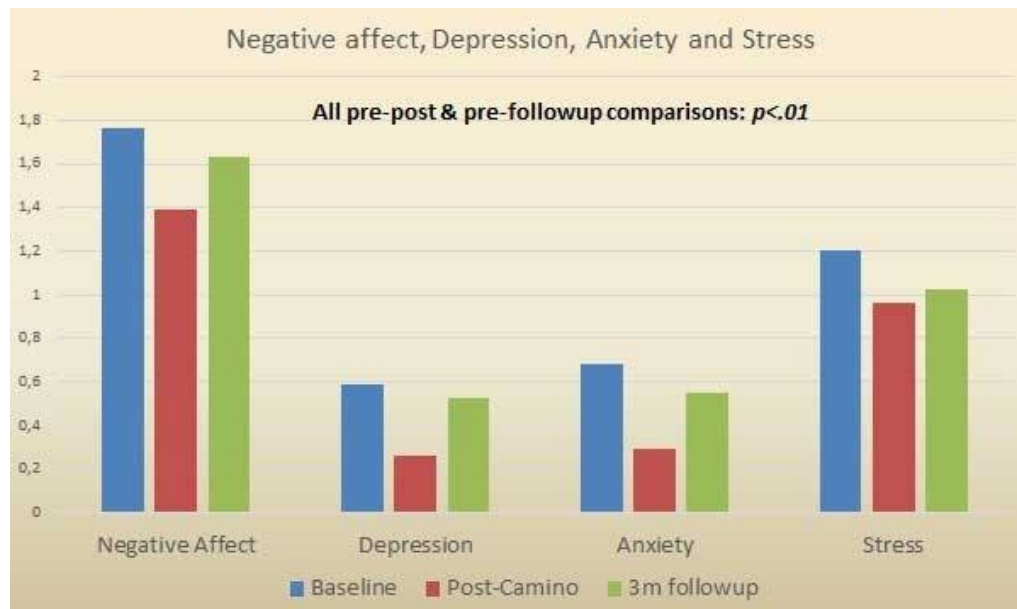
It is commonly reported by pilgrims returning home that the Camino has somehow changed their lives. In order to understand this phenomenon from a scientific point of view, measurable data and scientific research into this phenomenon are required. Thanks to the Ultreya Project (<http://estudiocamino.org/>), it is possible to examine whether the Camino is more effective (in terms of reducing stress levels and/or increasing wellbeing) than other types of holidays. It is also possible to explore the motivations of pilgrims (e.g. religion, culture, entertainment, sport, personal

**Figure 1: Positive Changes Through the Camino**  
(Baseline, Post- and 3 month follow-up measures (n=107))



(Source: [www.caminodelcambio.com/camino-de-santiago](http://www.caminodelcambio.com/camino-de-santiago), 19.07.2018)

**Figure 2 : Negative Changes Through the Camino  
(Baseline, Post- and 3 month follow-up measures (n=107))**



(Source: [www.caminodelcambio.com/camino-de-santiago](http://www.caminodelcambio.com/camino-de-santiago), 19.07.2018)

development) and whether these are associated with more significant changes in well-being or with long lasting effects on health.

Relying on the data obtained so far, significant changes have been observed in the reduction of negative affect, the symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress, as well as an increase in positive thinking, happiness, life satisfaction, conscious thinking skills and the ability to live in a more value-oriented way. It has also been examined that these changes are prevalent three months after the end of the pilgrimage. This is a scientific study, the methodology of which is characterized by a three-month observation of pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago. Participants are asked to fill in an online questionnaire containing sociodemographic data and the level of awareness, life satisfaction, depression, stress and fear when starting the Camino, at the end of the Camino and three months later.

These studies are the first scientific research on the Camino pilgrims in order to examine the therapeutic character of their pilgrimages. It is important to note that the discussion presented here is based on preliminary results, as the full study has not yet been completed. The study is being continued in order to expand the sample and to include in the results a control group of people choosing other types of holidays, such as spending several days in Costa Brava.

The authors of the study want not only to investigate the phenomenon itself, but also its causes. The study of the therapeutic effects of the Camino found that among pilgrims who claim to have had more experience of communion or union with the outside world during the Camino de Santiago, there is an even more beneficial effect. One of the therapeutic aspects of the Camino may be the focus on walking for so many days in a row, which introduces a kind of meditation, and other variables, such as the acceptance of the pain that inevitably accompanies pilgrims.

Another Spanish team from the University of Santiago de Compostela confirms that the Camino combines pilgrimage motivations (religious and spiritual) with tourist motivations, such as the search for different landscapes, the need for mental relaxation and escape from the pressures of everyday life (González *et al.*, 2014:161). Scientists from the University of Antonianum prove that the Camino offers a so-called *escape from the iron cage*, i.e. avoiding the impoverished logic of disappointment. The authors of the project conducted a survey with more than 470 pilgrims in various places along the Camino in 2013 which proves that the pilgrimage experience is part of a process through which pilgrims try to redefine their identity (Oviedo *et al.*, 2014: 435), thus testifying to their creative escapism.

However, from a theological-therapeutic perspective, escapism on the Camino manifests itself in the fact that it dates back to its roots in the evangelising mission and the beginnings of shaping the awareness of the culture and Christian identity of Europe (Roszak, 2017:55). It is not surprising, therefore, that pilgrims look for their own identity in the place where this identity has been formed over the course of two thousand years, and that this journey to the roots results in a positive personal experience for pilgrims.

John Paul II taught that Europe remains united to this day because it is united by human and Christian values, such as human dignity, a deep commitment to justice and freedom, diligence, the spirit of initiative, family love, respect for life, tolerance and a desire for cooperation and peace (John Paul II, 1983:29). Pilgrims on their travels are granted a special pilgrim blessing, which they receive during the journey in numerous churches located on the Camino. In the rite of pilgrims' blessing, the pastoral dimension is emphasised, because pilgrimages encourage the faithful to convert and deepen their Christian life. The rite of blessing strengthens the pilgrims on the pilgrim's way. Therefore it is significant that God's actions transcend the actions of natural things and the course of nature (Krzyżak, 2014:120). In this context, taking the Way of St. James is also a form of going beyond the natural, where God by His grace becomes a therapist and doctor, while the pilgrimage space is a convenient environment for His therapeutic activities.

The phrase found on the Camino route, written by the pilgrims: *Escaping from hope, escaping from Hell... from the Top to the Roots... we go to the end, to the truth*, indicates that on the trail of St. James, one who embarks on the journey is taking up the journey. At the end of their escapist path they expect to find the truth, which can be understood as the truth about themselves, but also as the discovery of God as the source of all truths. According to the words of Jesus: 'You will know the truth, and the truth will liberate you' (Jn 8:32). Thus, in a theological view, the creative escapism of the Camino pilgrims is manifested by distinguishing the characteristic traits that the pilgrims develop, which can be defined as the virtues of the pilgrim in the context of the theology of the virtues of St. Thomas of Aquinas (Aquinas, 2006:49–67). Therefore, although Thomas Aquinas was neither a doctor nor a psychiatrist, his teaching about virtues, especially about the virtue of moderation and valour, reveals the mechanism of their formation or resistance in shaping them. According to Thomas Aquinas, humankind remained a psychological unity, hence

human moral abilities were analysed on the psychophysical, cognitive and effective level, as well as on the level of mental reason and will, in which passions (hope – despair, courage – fear, anger) and sentiments (love – hatred, desire – avoidance of desire, joy – sadness) play an important role (Mróz M, 2018: 117).

One of the fruits of the Camino is the creation of sections of the Way of St. James in Poland, which is primarily due to groups of lovers of the Way of St. James, Camino pilgrims, members of St. James' fraternities and associations of St. James and pastors. In the vast majority of cases, it is a grassroots initiative and an expression of social entrepreneurship by dozens of people. In Spain, the process of designing, delineating and labelling the Camino is the result of actions taken by the Spanish Federation of Associations of Friends of the Camino de Santiago. (Federación Española de Asociaciones de Amigos del Camino de Santiago), the Spanish government authorities and the authorities of autonomous regions (Mróz F, 2018: 292). However, this approach cannot be treated as universal. Polish pilgrims returning from Santiago show high levels of enthusiasm in undertaking creative initiatives, which, due to the fact that more than half of them set out on a pilgrimage for escapist motives, indicates the creative character of their escapism.

### ***Peregrination Perpetua***

Paradoxically, the idea of the *peregrination perpetua* (eternal pilgrimage) from St. Benedict was intended to encourage Benedictine monks to deepen their prayerful contemplation and to build monastic stability. It referred to the original Latin meaning of the term *peregrinus* as the one who is on his way and remains a stranger wherever he travels. With time, however, the idea of an eternal pilgrimage began to be associated more with the aspect of leaving, breaking away and renouncing the pilgrims, so that the pilgrimage was linked to a departure, a departure from worries and an excess of tasks (Gros, 2015: 118–119). In this context, pilgrimage in its very essence has an escapist character. On the other hand, pilgrimage to the tomb of St James the Apostle in Santiago de Compostela also contains an element of an end, because it involves a journey to the end of the world (*finis terrae*), beyond which the ocean stretches, which until the discovery of America seemed to be the end of everything. Santiago de Compostela is therefore also the natural geographical end of the road after which the return journey must begin. The second part of the Latin

*Codex Calixtinus* from the 12th century was devoted to the description of twenty-two miracles attributed to St. James. In this context, the pilgrimage of Camino is a combination of the miracles of St. James with the miracle of the road as a personal experience of transformation, which, according to the French philosopher Frederic Gros, is the mystical ideal of the pilgrim, who should return from the pilgrimage completely changed (2015:130). In relation to this, the interpretation of the creative act understood as a mystical experience of changing people (Stiepun, 1999: 123–127) is a good summary of the above considerations. Stiepun, analysing the concept of *experience*, lists the opposite poles: life and creativity. In his understanding, life is an element of reversal from the outside world, which is connected with immersion inside the soul, while creativity is a return movement. In this sense, experience as a creative act is an ascent to infinity and a subsequent return to finiteness (Jędrisko, 2012: 96), an interpretation that shows a pilgrim going to a shrine and then returning home changed. It is also an image of *peregrination perpetua* of pilgrims heading for the end of the world to Santiago de Compostela and continuing their personal path of life after returning to their homes.

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